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ABSTRACT

The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) is committed to improving the quality of basic skills provision in England and Wales. It has encouraged the development of quality assurance in basic skills so that potential and existing students know what they should be entitled to expect. ALBSU's Good Practice documents published since 1984 have tried to suggest how the quality of basic skills provision can be improved. "Evaluating Effectiveness in Adult Literacy and Basic Skills" suggests a framework for evaluation and proposes five performance indicators: average class size, student enrollment, student progress, student attendance, and program cost. ALBSU now proposes a set of "quality standards" for basic skills programs. The 12 elements recommend that every person taking part in a basic skills program should be entitled to the following: a confidential, personal interview before beginning tuition; a learning opportunity within easy reach of home; at least 4 hours of direct tuition per week; an appropriate teacher-student ratio in a learning group; respect for gender and cultural identity; a negotiated learning plan; regular assessment of progress; access to progression including advice and guidance; access to accreditation; teaching by staff trained to nationally recognized standards; access to suitable learning material; and teaching that takes account of the context for learning. (YLB)

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QUALITY STANDARDS FOR BASIC SKILLS

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ALBSU
The Basic Skills Unit

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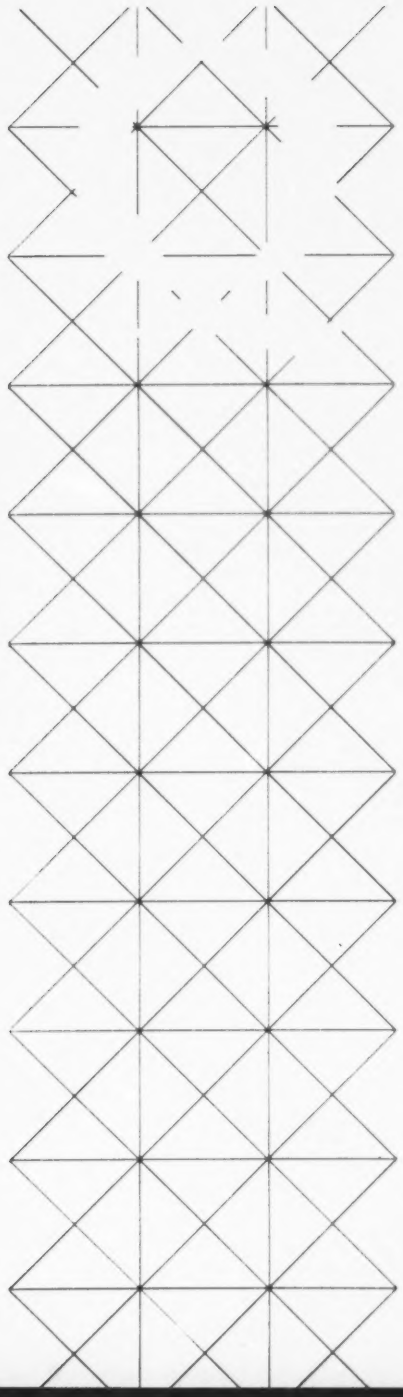

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Foreword

ALL of us at ALBSU are committed to improving the quality of adult literacy and basic skills provision in England and Wales. We have already done a great deal to help to improve standards through our free consultancy work, the funding of development projects and the Good Practice publications we have produced regularly in the last few years.

We know that much good basic skills provision already exists. What we need to do, however, is make sure that high quality provision exists everywhere. It's important that everyone who has had an unsuccessful and frustrating experience in education is able to see that it need not always be that way. Adults can improve essential skills – the skills all of us need to progress effectively in our demanding, industrialised society – but only if high quality basic skills education and training is readily available.

Our *Quality Standards for Basic Skills Programmes* are intended to establish what every person should be able to expect when they join a programme. It shouldn't matter whether you learn in the centre nearest to where you live, in an Open Learning Centre, as part of a TEC or government training programme or in a prison; what you should be entitled to expect should be the same.

We are also introducing a 'Quality Mark' for basic skills programmes as part of the development of the Standards – a symbol which will indicate that a minimum standard is available from a basic skills programme. We know that it will take some time for every basic skills programme to reach the standard required for the 'Quality Mark' and we are committed to helping organisations reach this level. We are also aware that many basic skills programmes will be able to provide more than the minimum entitlement we suggest, including greater choice of learning opportunity, free tuition and intensive courses.

We do not believe that a minimum standard means a levelling down; rather *Quality Standards for Basic Skills Programmes* will help to ensure that everyone receives a high quality service wherever they live in England and Wales.

Peter Davis

Peter Davis
Chairman, ALBSU

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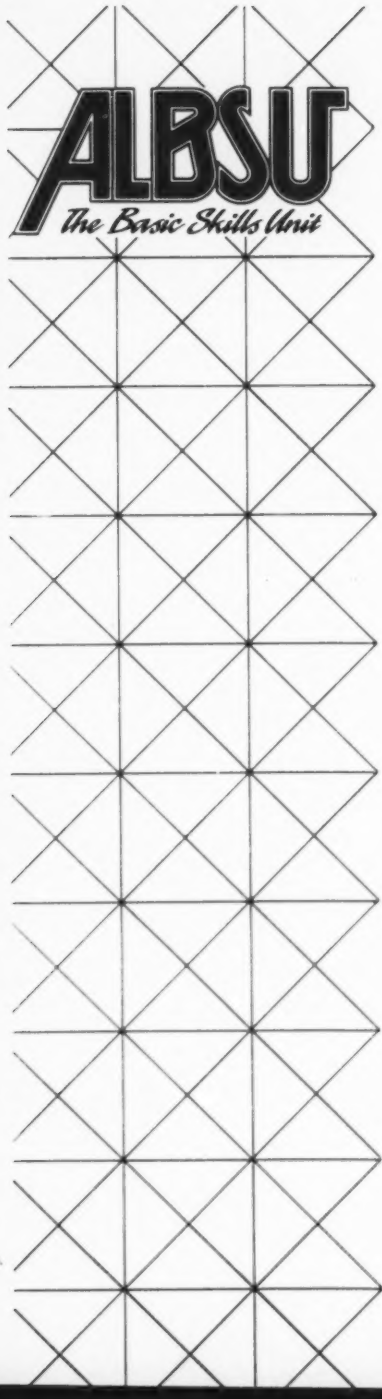


ALBSU is the national agency for adult literacy, numeracy and related basic skills in England and Wales. By Basic Skills, we mean:

'the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general'.

In Wales basic skills includes the ability to read and write Welsh for adults whose mother tongue is Welsh.

Our definition of basic skills does not include necessarily wider provision for adults with learning difficulties or other special needs, English as Foreign Language (EFL) or general access and return to study courses.

ALBSU's Patron is Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal and the Unit's Chairman is Peter Davis, Chairman of Reed International, one of the largest publishing and information companies. ALBSU is funded by Central Government and currently has a total budget of just over £4,500,000 per annum.

As well as campaigning for basic skills provision, we:

- provide free consultancy for local education authorities (LEAs), colleges, employers and other providers
- sponsor development projects and initiatives
- publish teaching and learning material
- fund the training of staff
- advise the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Wales on basic skills matters
- undertake research.

Introduction

ALBSU is committed to improving the quality of basic skills provision in England and Wales. Since we were established in 1980 we have encouraged the development of quality assurance in basic skills in order that potential and existing students know what they should be entitled to expect.

We support variety in basic skills provision in order that local basic skills programmes can meet local circumstances and need. Basic skills provision in a densely populated urban area cannot be tranposed as a model to a sparsely populated rural area, where travel and distance provide considerable challenge in ensuring access. Variety also reinforces, we believe, the desirability of choice in learning, particularly as a single approach is unlikely to suit everyone. Variety and quality are not in opposition, however.

Much of education and training is involved in quality assurance. Total Quality Management (TQM), BS 5750/IS 9000 and 'Investors in People' are all intended to ensure that parents, pupils, students and employees are aware of the standards of performance they can expect and managers and staff are aware of what they need to strive to provide.

ALBSU Good Practice Publications

ALBSU's Good Practice documents published since 1984 have tried to suggest how the quality of basic skills provision can be improved. Initially Good Practice documents concentrated on inputs – the resources needed to provide a high quality basic skills service. We believe that this was an important starting point for a service marginally funded, with very limited resources and overly dependent on the commitment of relatively few paid staff. Many LEAs have adopted the suggestions contained in our Good Practice documents and, despite a difficult economic climate, have increased the resources available for basic skills, including the number of paid support staff.

We recognised, however, that improving quality is not just about inputs. We need a framework for judging the effectiveness of basic skills provision in order to ensure that the service provides value for money. Inefficient, poor value provision helps no one and yet few measures of effectiveness existed until we published a Good Practice document, *Evaluating Effectiveness in Adult Literacy and Basic Skills*, in 1990.

Performance Indicators for Basic Skills

EVALUATING Effectiveness in Adult Literacy and Basic Skills suggested a framework for evaluation, as well as proposed indicators of performance for basic skills programmes. Although not everyone agreed with all of it, we believe that most people have found *Evaluating Effectiveness* a helpful publication.

Evaluating Effectiveness proposed five Performance Indicators for basic skills programmes in England and Wales:

- average class size
- student progress
- programme cost
- student enrolment
- student attendance

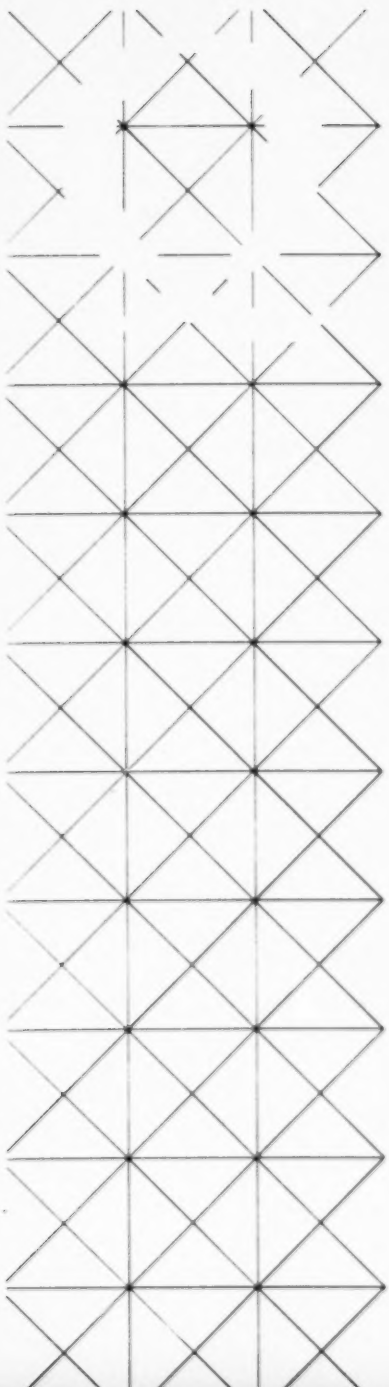
We also suggested, in *Evaluating Effectiveness*, targets for basic skills programmes related to these Performance Indicators.

Quality Standards

WE now propose to introduce a set of 'quality standards' for basic skills programmes. These 'Quality Standards' set out what everybody should expect to receive if they join a programme. They are the minimum standard a student or trainee should be able to expect.

By basic skills 'programme' we mean basic skills provision organised by an agency, organisation or institution in a specific geographical area or for a specific group of people. For example, in an LEA's area, basic skills may be being offered by a number of organisations; programmes may be being offered by one or more colleges of further education, by one or more adult or community education centres or community schools or by private training providers and voluntary organisations. There will also be basic skills provision in specific institutions such as prisons.

Often a 'programme' will be based within a specific geographical area and will be the responsibility of a paid organiser or co-ordinator. Whilst a few classes provided in a centre or school will not usually be a separate 'programme', provision based in a number of centres and organised or co-ordinated by a paid member of staff will.



Basic skills provision in colleges of further education may be the responsibility of a single school, faculty or department of the college; in other cases a number of schools, faculties or departments may provide basic skills teaching and these will usually constitute separate programmes. Many, individual training managers contracted by a Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) organise a basic skills training 'programme', as do some employers and voluntary organisations.

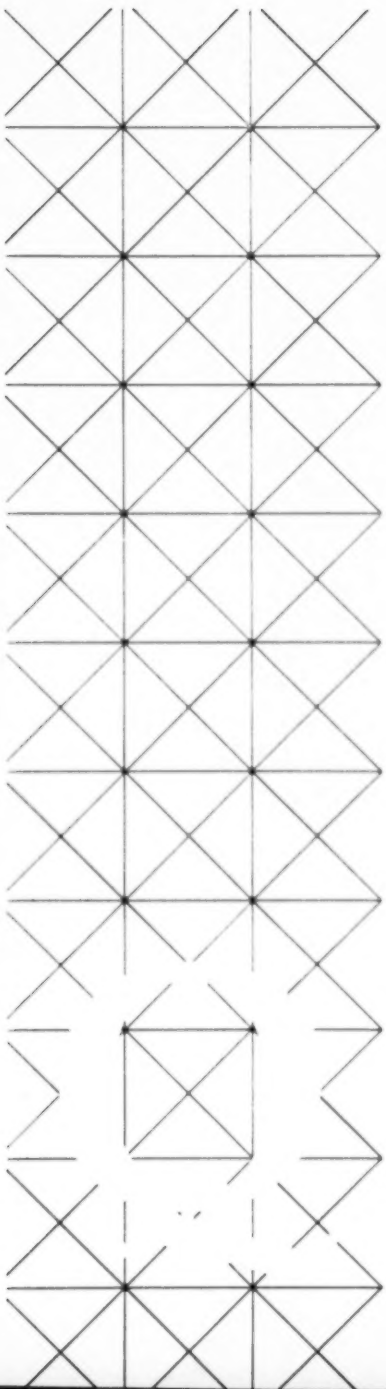
Programmes which meet the ALBSU Quality Standards for Basic Skills Programmes, will be able to use the ALBSU 'Quality Mark' on all publicity about the basic skills programme. A separate leaflet *Using the ALBSU Quality Mark* is available describing how providers can seek recognition for basic skills programmes.

We recognise the danger of introducing an ALBSU 'Quality Mark' overnight, particularly as we know that some providers will need time to meet the standard required. We are committed to helping organisations which cannot meet the standard required as present, but would like to be able to in the near future. By 31 March 1995, however, we hope that most basic skills programmes in England and Wales will meet the standards required and will be able to use the ALBSU 'Quality Mark'.

Post school education is going through a period of great change. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 introduces central funding of further education and 6th form colleges through Further Education Funding Councils in England and in Wales. Provision, specified in Schedule 2 of the Act, including literacy, numeracy and ESOL, will be centrally funded through the Funding Councils and it will be important that the quality of basic skills provision is maintained and improved.

The increasing role played by colleges of further education in basic skills provision presents an opportunity for expansion and a challenge to maintain and improve quality. Some colleges of further education already provide basic skills opportunities both within the college and through community based work.

In other areas, colleges have little experience of basic skills provision outside of support offered to students on college courses. Most of these colleges are keen to improve their knowledge and skills and many are considering collaborative approaches with other more experienced providers in their area. Often this will mean contracting existing LEA providers, and in some



cases new providing agencies such as voluntary organisations, to provide basic skills education and it will be important that this contracting is based on clear quality standards.

TECs play an important part in basic skills provision, particularly vocationally related basic skills training for young people and adults. TECs are a major contractor of basic skills training and most TECs contract a range of agencies to make this specialist provision, including adult education centres, colleges of further education and private and voluntary organisations. Although still small in scale, basic skills training in the workplace is forming a part of an increasing number of companies' training strategies and, although some companies contract this training to education and training agencies, others try to provide 'in-house'.

There is also a considerable amount of basic skills provision in prisons and other penal establishments funded by the Home Office. Basic skills provision in prisons is usually provided by specialist staff working in a prison's education department. There are rather special factors which effect basic skills provision in a prison and we have tried to take account of these in developing the ALBSU 'Quality Standards.'

All of these different providers work in slightly different contexts. We believe, however, that common standards are essential whatever the context of learning. Common standards will ensure that every person's entitlement will be the same, wherever they live, whatever their age, whatever their status and whatever the context in which they learn.

The ALBSU Standards

Every person taking part in a basic skills programme should be entitled to:

1. A confidential, personal interview before beginning tuition.
2. A learning opportunity within easy reach of home.
3. At least four hours direct tuition a week.
4. An appropriate teacher/student ratio in a learning group.
5. Respect for gender and cultural identity.
6. A negotiated learning plan.
7. Regular assessment of progress.
8. Access to progression including advice and guidance.
9. Access to accreditation.
10. Teaching by staff trained to nationally recognised standards.
11. Access to suitable learning material.
12. Teaching which takes account of the context for learning.

Below we describe, in more detail, each of the elements of the ALBSU 'Quality Standards'.

1. A confidential, personal interview before beginning tuition

All potential new basic skills students or trainees should be entitled to a confidential, personal interview before beginning tuition. This interview should be at least 20 minutes in length and should be conducted in private. An initial interview should include an opportunity for a prospective student or trainee to:

- find out about the basic skills programe in general
- receive information about the learning opportunities available
- identify needs and goals
- receive advice and guidance about appropriate learning opportunities.

2. A learning opportunity within easy reach of home

It is essential that basic skills provision is accessible and that learning opportunities exist as near to where people live as possible. We acknowledge that some specialist provision, such as workplace courses, may require travel by a student or trainee and that some people may prefer to travel rather than attend locally.

By 'within easy reach of home' we mean that at least one learning opportunity should be available within approximately 20-30 minutes travelling time, by public transport, of home. We acknowledge, however, that some students and trainees may not wish to take up the nearest opportunities to where they live.

3. At least four hours direct tuition a week

Every basic skills student or trainee should be entitled to at least four hours of direct tuition a week. We recognise that some people will not want to take advantage of this much tuition and may prefer to attend less frequently; this is very much up to the individual and their particular circumstances. Some people may want rather more than the minimum and some providers will be able to provide at this level.

By direct tuition we mean instruction, rather than the undertaking of homework or extended study not under the supervision of a basic skills teacher or trainer.

4. An appropriate teacher/student ratio in a learning group

Small groups are essential in basic skills work if students and trainees are to receive the appropriate amount of individual attention. If a group is too large students and trainees tend to 'drop-out' for lack of teacher support often after making very little progress.

Where the majority of the students or trainees in a group are at a very basic level of attainment (at Foundation Level or below of Wordpower or Numberpower) a ratio of one paid teacher to a maximum of 6-8 students, irrespective of the number of volunteers, would be considered appropriate by ALBSU.

Where the majority of students in a group are at an intermediate level (i.e. Wordpower or Numberpower Stage 1) a ratio of one teacher to a maximum of 8-10 students would be considered appropriate.

Where the majority of basic skills students are at a higher level (Wordpower Stages 2 and 3 or Numberpower Stage 2) learning groups of one teacher to a maximum of 10-12 students would be considered appropriate. All of these refer to students and trainees attending regularly rather than the notional number on role.

5. Respect for gender and cultural identity

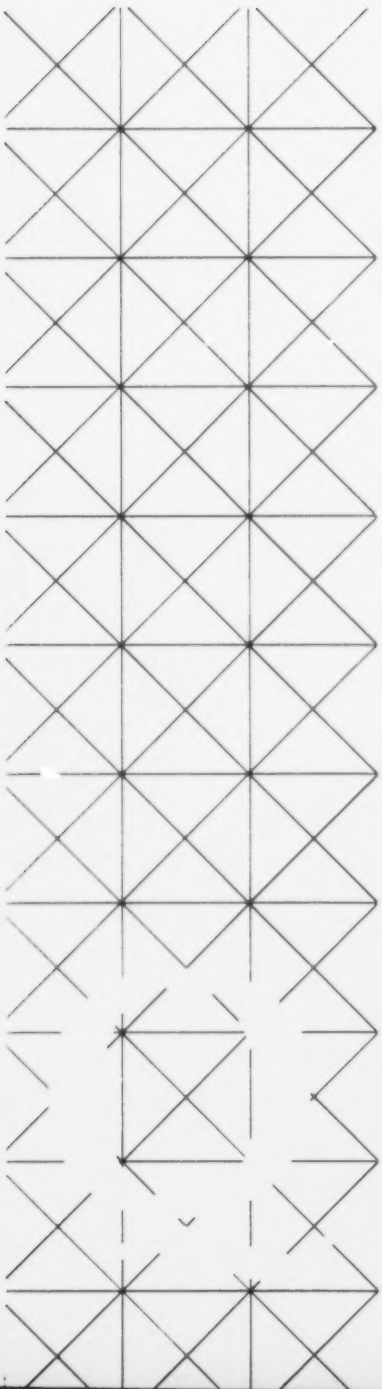
It is important that all potential and existing basic skills students or trainees should feel respected and appreciated irrespective of gender, race or culture.

Basic skills staff should be aware of gender and cultural issues, should only use appropriate language and should receive regular equal opportunities training. The organisation responsible for the basic skills programme should have a published Equal Opportunities Policy. An equal opportunities statement should be included as part of the information provided for each student or trainee about the basic skills programme.

6. A negotiated learning plan

Every student or trainee should be entitled to a negotiated learning plan at the beginning of tuition or at the start of a new session. A learning plan should be:

- negotiated and agreed between student and tutor
- written in clear, plain language



- specific about targets and learning goals and contain an outline of the steps needed to reach a particular learning goal, including the competences and skills being developed as part of the learning plan
- regularly reviewed and revised.

7. Regular assessment of progress

Every student and trainee should be entitled to a structured assessment of progress on a regular basis. Assessment should be conducted in such a way that a student or trainee can participate in assessing their progress. Assessment of progress should be as objective as possible and should record, in writing, the competences and skills learnt or improved in a given period.

By 'regular assessment' we mean after approximately 40-60 hours of direct tuition.

8. Access to progression including advice and guidance

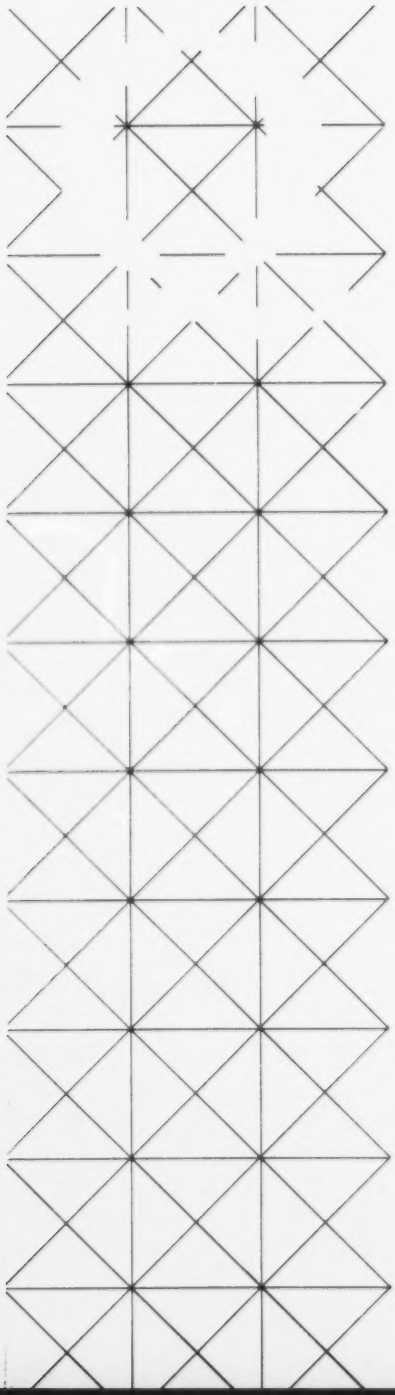
Every student and trainee should be able to progress from basic skills to other education and training opportunities, although we recognise that not every student will wish to do so. Progression may be to a vocationally, occupationally or non-vocational course of study and basic skills programmes should ensure that students and trainees are aware of the opportunities existing locally.

At least once a term, or once in a course of a specified length, a specific session should be devoted to advice and guidance about progression opportunities.

9. Access to accreditation

Basic skills students and trainees should be able to gain recognised accreditation for basic skills. Accreditation should be validated by a recognised validating body and accreditation should be to Standards developed by ALBSU for basic skills students and trainees. We recognise that some students and trainees may be receiving accreditation for basic skills as part of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

We acknowledge, however, that not every basic skills student and trainee will want accreditation and some people will be at a standard of competence which means that accreditation is likely to be a long, rather than short-term objective.



10. Teaching by staff trained to nationally recognised standards

It is essential that all staff, whether paid or voluntary, are adequately trained to teach basic skills to young people and adults. Basic skills teaching is no place for the well meaning amateur and training in other areas of teaching, such as primary or adult education, whilst a useful additional experience, needs to be enhanced through specific training in teaching basic skills to adults and young people.

All new staff should undertake a pre-service, nationally recognised initial training scheme of at least 30 hours duration, such as City & Guilds 9282/9283/9284, before beginning work in basic skills.

More experienced basic skills staff should have embarked on the process of acquiring additional nationally recognised accreditation, such as City & Guilds 9285, within two years of beginning to work in basic skills. All training should be consistent with the ALBSU *Standards for Basic Skills Teachers*.

11. Access to suitable learning material

All students and trainees should have access to good learning material. The learning material available should be suitable for use in basic skills, either because it has been produced with this as its primary aim or because it is applicable to basic skills work.

In general, although there may be some exceptions when working with parents or other adults caring for children, material designed for use with children is not appropriate in basic skills.

12. Teaching which takes account of the context for learning

It is important that basic skills teachers and trainers are equipped and trained to deliver basic skills in a variety of contexts. For example, workplace or work related courses should only be delivered by staff who are experienced and trained to relate basic skills learning to occupational and vocational contexts. Similarly staff working with parents should be able to relate teaching and learning to the context of caring for and raising children.

Conclusion

QUALITY standards are essential in basic skills provision if educationally disadvantaged adults and young people are to receive the best learning opportunities available. Anyone wanting to improve their basic skills should be aware of what they should be able to expect of any basic skills programme. ALBSU's 'Quality Standards' set out the minimum a student or trainee should be entitled to expect from a basic skills programme. We know that many providers will be keen to offer more including a wide choice of learning opportunities, substantial courses of study, free tuition and high quality accommodation for learning groups and individuals.

We are committed to raising the standards of practice and performance in basic skills throughout England and Wales. We know that not every organisation will be able to meet the standards required immediately and we are committed to helping organisations reach the level required in the next few years. By the middle of the decade, we hope to have a service where all basic skills providing organisations are meeting these standards, wherever they are based and in whatever context they operate.

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